

# The Peril of an Unbelieving Heart

## Hebrews 3:7-19

There is no greater danger than be in the place where most of you are, week after week after week. You are here at church to hear the Word of God, to be near the people of God, to experience the power of God and hopefully to enter into the blessings of God. You have seen changed lives and heard faith building testimonies and edifying sermons. Your heart was tender and open to the things of God.

But not now. You know that serving God has become dry and deadening. Church is boring and at times an irritating interruption to what, in your heart of hearts, you really want to do. The Bible no longer seems to be real to you. God seems distant to you. You try to worship, to pray, to study – and it all seems empty. And it seems so hard to understand, because you just know you are a Christian and this is not how Christians ought to be feeling. What is wrong?

These paragraphs address what may have gone wrong. Spiritual dryness has many causes: unconfessed sin, bitterness, hurts and wounds from the past, lack of use of the means of grace, testing from the Lord. But this text speaks clearly and I pray with real encouragement in its hope giving and faith sustaining truth.

These paragraphs were addressed to men and women who were under pressure and persecution in their lives like we little know. They were being sorely tempted to reject their faith and return to the security and comfort of their former religion in order to avoid the pain and pressure they were under. So these are not hammer blows to take away their confidence and destroy their assurance. These exhortations are meant to stir up and feed and sustain faith so that they will hold fast. For sin and unbelief are vital issues for everyone in the church.

Hear this: God does not sustain our faith by grace in a vacuum. He feeds and strengthens and sustains our belief by the Word. We cannot have saving nor transforming faith apart from the Word. We must be constantly hearing the Word. What is heard must be addressed at the point of our weaknesses. It is utterly foolish to shore up a toppling building at its strongest points. No, the joints and beams that are failing are the ones built up and strengthened. So, if what has been said so far describes you, then you need to hear this Word, and that is why our Author begins with the Word as he does.

## The Scriptural Example

(v.7-11)

“Since it is important that we hold fast, hear what the Spirit says in Psalm 95.”

<sup>7</sup> Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

“Today, if you hear his voice,

<sup>8</sup> do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,  
on the day of testing in the wilderness,

<sup>9</sup> where your fathers put me to the test  
and saw my works for forty years.

<sup>10</sup> Therefore I was provoked with that generation,  
and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart;  
they have not known my ways.’

<sup>11</sup> As I swore in my wrath,  
‘They shall not enter my rest.’ ”

That is the connection the author is making. I want each of you to turn in your copy of God's Word and begin reading in verse 6. Recognize this? We sing this text often—have we ever thought about the relation of verses 6-7 with verses 8-11?

Now listen to Hebrews 3:6ff. "We are God's house if we hold fast." So, here is what the Holy Spirit says. "Come let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for He is our God and we are the people of His pasture and the flock under His care. Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart." So those who are bowing down in worship as God's people must, if they are hearing the Word, not harden their hearts.

So, what is the Spirit saying through this text?

### ***Explains the Disobedience of Israel***

Imagine, Israel had been led by God to the point where they stood a river apart from seeing the fulfillment of all the promises God had made. They had received the Law of God, were worshipping in the Tabernacle of God, were eating the manna from heaven, and had seen water from the rock. They had heard the voice of God on the mountain and in the tabernacle and in the Scripture.

Yet because of the unbelief of a hardened heart, they were more than just a river from the Promised Land, they were 40 years and a generation away. They were the unbelief of a hardened heart away.

### ***Speaks to Israel of David's Day***

Now remember, what is being quoted here is in the Psalms. So David is penning these words as an instructive song to exhort the people to enter into the rest of God *in David's day*. So Israel of David's day also must enter into God's rest *by hearing the voice of God in the Word and believing*. They who are in the land can actually miss the rest by the unbelief of a hardened heart.

### ***Warns Us Today***

There are huge spiritual lessons for us in the life and times of Old Testament Israel. That they stood on the verge of experiencing the victory of God's promises to them and turned away comes to us as a deep warning that we can do the same today.

That is precisely what the Author does. What makes this a challenging text to exposit is that it is itself an exposition of a text—it is a mini sermon itself. Look at the geography of this massive text.

The topic sentence is in 3:6. We begin with "holding fast"

The text of the sermon is in verses 7-11, as he quotes the Scripture.

Then, by way of exposition, he draws out 3 exhortations from the truth of Psalm 95. If we must hold fast and if we must battle the unbelief of a hard heart, then:

Let us see to it that we do not have evil unbelieving hearts (3:12-19);

Let us be careful that we do not come short of entering God's rest (4:1-10);

Let us make every effort to enter that rest by faith's obedience (4:11-13).

The conclusion is reached in 4:14-16. Therefore, we must hold fast for Jesus is praying for us in our time of need.

Notice once again the parallels in the two arguments of the first four chapters of Hebrews.

From chapter 1 through the first part of chapter 2, Jesus is greater than the prophets and the angels therefore we must not *drift from the Word* and we must not neglect *the greatness of our salvation* in Christ.

In chapters 3 and 4, Jesus is greater than Moses therefore we must not *doubt [disbelieve] the Word* and we must not neglect *the greatness of our rest* in Christ.

Now I cannot take and unpack all of the Author's exposition of Psalm 95 this morning. We will do that next Sunday, by God's grace. So we will be leaving some questions open. For example: what is this *rest*? How can I know if I have a hard heart? What help is there for us to trust God's Word and to enter into His rest?

This morning, let us take up only the first exhortation that comes from this massive text in Psalm 95.

## The Sustaining Exhortation

(v.12-13)

"Belief is a group project." (Piper)

<sup>12</sup> Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Know why this is so? Because the sinful tendency of any group is toward doubt. Think about it. Over a million people believed the evil report of the ten and doubted the promises of God *and never entered into those promises*. So that is why we are told to "see to it", to "take care".

### The Commands

(v.12-13a)

What are we to give our attention to?

#### Examining Ourselves

(v.12)

We have an individual responsibility that comes first. That is why God always has his Caleb's and Joshua's who believe God and trust His promises *and enter into rest long after everyone else has passed on*. They had taken care that they themselves did not have evil unbelieving hearts, even if everyone else did.

Many have said, "At the heart of every problem is a problem with the heart." See? It is an evil or sinful heart that is unbelieving. Let me put this more pointedly. It is sin in the heart to not believe God. Why? Because we will believe and trust and treasure something. And if we disbelieve God, we will turn away from Him who is living to rest our trust in what is dead. Now, hang onto that thought. Write it down. Because this will be critical to understanding what our *rest* is.

How is it that we can turn away from God?

Because the sinful unbelieving heart is one that has never been converted by grace. We have been near the things of God, the people of God, the power of God and even the Word of God. But we have never actually experienced the saving grace of God. So what we have here is a falling away from a fiancée, not a turning away from a spouse. (Piper)

Because we have made it a practice to turn again and again from believing and trusting and doing God's Word to hungering after passing pleasures of the slavery of Egypt. Or we turn away from liberating truths to the bondage of the religion of the past.

We had better be giving attention to our hearts to see if we are turning away from God in unbelief. This can be a disturbing and discouraging exercise. We all can see some risings of sin and unbelief in us. How do we then keep from sinking into despair and actually turning away from the sweetness and hope of God's promises because we are overwhelmed?

Then we have the next thing we are to give attention to.

### **Encouraging One Another**

**(v.13a)**

"But encourage one another daily." Here is how we turn belief into a group or community or church project. We encourage and exhort and enable one another. We constantly tell one another what God says in His Word; we quote promises to one another. We keep turning one another back from Egypt to the living God. We tell each other faith building stories of how God has kept His promises. We pray with and for one another. We stretch one another's understanding of the Word and sharpen one another's obedience to the Word.

And we do it daily. Let me say this to you. Please understand that it is not possible, in a growing congregation, to cultivate Biblically intimate and faith encouraging relationships if all you do is come to church. Fellowship is important to us here. But the services of the church are designed for worship and exposition. If you are going to believe that faith is sustained by encouragement—and that is what this is saying—then you have to give yourself to encouraging and exhorting others. Don't pursue it for yourself. Don't go out looking for someone to encourage you. You just pour out your life into the lives of others. You know what happens? Your own belief and obedience will be sustained and strengthened as others pour their lives into you.

This is what flock groups are supposed to be all about. And we are going to be re-evaluating them to see if they are actually achieving their purpose. This is part of what Men and Women's Ministries is all about. For every evidence that God is using our fellowship together to build believing obedience, we praise God and we pray for grace for more of it.

One last thing that the Spirit is saying to us in these words. If we are to be encouraging one another in the direction of believing obedience from hearts that are tender towards God and hear God's Word, *then we must stop the gossip and backbiting and criticism of one another at the personal level that destroys and devours one another and discourages our faith.* It was the constant bickering and grumbling of Israel that turned them over and over again back to Egypt and away from the promises of God. And so it is with us. If we must encourage one another daily, then we must not destroy one another daily. And some of you hearing this today need to believe God and not harden your heart and repent and confess your sin to the one you've wronged and then lay down your life to encourage one another.

What is it that makes this absolutely necessary?

### **The Cause**

**(v.13b)**

We must examine ourselves and encourage one another because sin hardens us in self-deceiving ways.

Sin hardens us like calluses so that we are no longer sensitive to God. We are constantly rubbing up against the passing pleasures of the world so that our souls are callused and no longer open and tender to breath-taking wonder of God.

Sin hardens us like fossils. What once was living and vibrant slowly sinks into useless stone. The settling sediment of sin hardens hearts into petrified wood.

Sin hardens us like slowly baked soil. Under the bright light of sin, the soft soil of our heart hardens so that the seed of the Word of God does not grow and flourish and bear fruit.

Sin hardens us like ruts. Sin runs over our lives again and again like the semis on a highway. Its constant passing wears deep ruts into the habits of our lives so that we find it difficult to break free.

Sin hardens us like arthritis. The harboring of sin in the heart hardens us so that we become stiff and inflexible and brittle and fragile and full of pain.

The hardening of sin affects our ears so that we do not hear God, our eyes so that we do not see God, our mouths so that we do not speak of God, our hands so that we are limited in our service for God. Sins hardening deceits fool our minds into thinking we are knowing God when we don't, our hearts into believing we are loving God when we don't, our souls into experiencing God when we aren't. The hardening of sin deceives us into believing that just because we can talk about Christian truth that we have experienced it.

The Spirit has gripped me with the fact if we are not encouraging one another, we will become hard and callused and rutted and arthritic *and we may not even know it*. The hardening effects of sin are part of its deceptiveness. And I have only had to look into the mirror of the Word of God to find all of these reflected in my heart.

Sin deceives us into valuing things instead of treasuring God.

Sin deceives us into doing what we want instead of what God wills.

Sin deceives us into immediate gratification without regards to long-term consequences.

Sin deceives us into thinking no one knows when God always sees.

Sin deceives us into thinking that we are being sanctified when we are merely being sanctimonious.

Sin deceives us into living for ourselves when we ought to be dying for others.

Sin deceives us into spending when we ought to be giving.

Sin deceives us into lusting when we ought to be loving.

Sin deceives us into depression when we ought to be delighting.

Sin deceives us into doubting when we ought to be trusting.

Sin deceives into thinking we know God when He doesn't know us at all.

Therefore, the encouraging affect of exhorting one another daily is to keep us from the self-deceiving effects of sin's hardening.

## The Solemn Explanation

**(v.14-19)**

Verses 14-18 are explanations of why we must give attention and take care to examine ourselves and to encourage and exhort one another. Why because both 14 and 16 should begin with the word "for".

<sup>14</sup> For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. <sup>15</sup> As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

<sup>16</sup> For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? <sup>17</sup> And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? <sup>18</sup> And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? <sup>19</sup> So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

### ***Two Classes of People***

***(v.14-18)***

The Author reminds us that there are two classes of people who are standing at the Jordan with all the promises of God stretched out before them.

#### **Those Who Partake of Christ**

**(v.14-15)**

“For we are partakers in Christ.” Here again is that same conditional construction we have encountered in Hebrews. We are not confronted with the frightening prospect that we might lose our salvation. But that having shared in or partaken of Christ, we will hold fast. Partaking of Christ enables holding fast. Hearing these exhortations and warnings and encouragements is how God causes us to hold fast.

So there are those who hold on to their confidence in the promises of God in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles because they have truly partaken of Christ.

#### **Those Who Provoke God**

**(v.16-18)**

“For who are those who provoked God?” Now the Author places all of us on the skewer of his questions.

Who had provoked God? All of the Israelites who came out of Egypt led by Moses.

Who had angered God? Those who sinned and wandered around and eventually died in the wilderness.

Who never entered God’s rest? Those who disobeyed.

So there are those who may be with the people of God but because of disobedience provoke and anger God and never enter God’s rest.

### ***One Cause of Failure***

***(v.19)***

They are not able because they do not believe. Those who have partaken of Christ have believed. Those who never enter the rest, don’t because they do not believe. This is radical for us because we do not see unbelief as the root of our failure. We do not understand that sin is the result of unbelief. When we reject the greatness of God’s promises and refuse to believe them in an obeying way, then we have turned from God Himself. We will not enter God’s rest. We will begin wandering in the wilderness.

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## Reflect and Respond

Now, I want to flesh this out for you a bit. In closing, I need to show you the relationship between disobedience and unbelief.

There are two sins which are brothers, one is something we ought to do and the other is something we ought not to do. They are both fruit of the same tree of unbelief. They are giving and worrying.

Now there are many of you who do not give and many others who give, but not proportionately. It is a sin not to give because the Bible tells us that Christians are generous, grateful and are receiving grace so that giving glorifies God. It is commanded in His Word. So you sin in not giving because you do not believe the promise that God will supply all your needs (Philippians 4:19). If you believed in an obeying way that God will supply all your needs, then you will give. That you do not give means that you do not believe God's promise. So, many of you are wandering in the wilderness of want and debt. And many who have much less are resting in the promises and are seeing astounding victories in God's provision. I say again to you: if you believe God's promise to supply all your needs, you will give. So do not harden your heart: believe God in an obeying way that gives and trust Him to provide.

This also works out with worry. Many of you worry. This is a sin because the Bible tells us not to worry. You sin in worrying because you have little faith (Matthew 6:25-34). You worry because you do not believe that God will take care of you. If you believe God in an obeying way then you will seek His kingdom first and bank your hope on the promise that God will take care of you today and tomorrow and all your tomorrows. You worry because you do not believe in God's goodness, His providence and His purposes. That is what Jesus said in Matthew 6. So many of you are wandering in the wilderness of ulcers and cares and concerns about food and clothes and shelter, cars and computers and stereos and some, retirement. And many who have little are resting in God's promises, They are pursuing God and loving ministry more than life. So do not harden your heart: believe God in an obeying way that pursues God's will in every area and trust Him to care for you.

Loved ones, let us examine ourselves and encourage one another so that we will not be hardened by sin's deceitfulness, so that we will believe God in an obeying way that brings us into the rest of God's promises.

